

NAEA Advisory

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Introduction to Aesthetics: A Strategy for Helping Students Determine "What is a Work of Art?"

Part I

by

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The most difficult art-related discipline to teach is aesthetics, the study of the nature of art which includes its origin, scope, and values. In order to widen students' perception and conception of art, a study of aesthetics is important. Aesthetics is a discussion of the concept of art in general, while art criticism is an in-depth study of one work of art. Both fields involve systematic talk about art and seem to intertwine in a conversation about art. The purpose of this advisory is to suggest questions for class discussion, some art theories, and strategies to explore.

What Is Art?

Give your students a pretest to determine what they think "art is" at the beginning of the year. These responses can then be compared to their art conceptions (post-test) at the end of the year to see how their art ideas have grown. I have done this even with second graders (Stokrocki, 1986). Start the year with a discussion of a few art objects, highlight each theory in separate art units during the year, and display the theories on flash cards in the room. Students can look to the cards to choose reasons that support their views.

Object is the Work of Art and Why?

To initiate a discussion about art, choose a few different objects, such as an original painting, a folk art piece, an ordinary chair, a natural object such as a cow skull, and a child's artwork. Direct students to look at these objects carefully at close range. Open the discussion with such questions as: "Which object is a work of art? and Why?" Students will enjoy debating about the nature of the pieces, especially if you videotape the session and show it to students later (Stokrocki, 1989). In the beginning, direct the turn-taking and don't worry about whether their ideas are correct. Help them feel comfortable expressing opinions and later give counter cases.

What Family Resemblances are in a Specific Art Form?

Students will have few problems judging a traditional art form, such as a painting, to be an art work. If the work is realistic then they can accept it more easily. If the object is abstract, then ask them to find family resemblances (compare) in three different paintings. Painting is a family or category of art. Many students do not realize that the most important thing in painting is paint—mixing it to achieve different representational and emotional effects. Since the nature of art is an open-ended question for which many art theories or recommendations exist, focus your discussion by considering the family resemblances of a specific art form (Weitz, 1956).

Who Considers this Art?

This question deals with the social nature of art and often leads students into the world of values and preferences. Even though they themselves would not prefer it, students soon realize that others do. This question asks them to consider the realm of folk art and what different folks value. See Erickson & Katter's (1991) interactive game *Token Response* for values clarification. This can be continued into the realm of the artworld "experts," museums, etc.

Which is the Original Work of Art?

Next, students may argue over the state of a work of art, such as a chair. Some chairs are originals or one of a kind; others are mass-produced. Ask them, "What is the original work of art?" Obviously, the prototype or model is valued by museums, but the reproduced copies may be highly valued as good design. Ask students, "What is more valuable—the plans (blueprints), the prototype, or the reproductions? The same could be argued about prints and the idea of an edition.

What Constitutes a Work of Art or an Art Experience?

Many art theorists have argued the question of art constitution. Collingwood (1978) called "art proper" the plan or idea behind the work, while Kaelin (1971) counter-argued, "What do you call the results, an after-thought?" Kaelin thus felt that the art-making was equally important. Discuss these ideas with students. Consider the question, "Of what does artistic experience consist?" (Dewey, 1934). Art experience may be considered a process of mentally recreating the decisions as well as the actions.

Are Children Artists?

Children are very familiar with their own art style or child art, but they rarely discuss whether they are artists or not. Ask children to consider "What is the difference between student art done at school and that which is done at home?" Most likely, children will refer to the type of art made in school as "school art," dominated by holiday and design themes (Efland, 1976). Children may tell us that the kind of art done at home (child art) is more concerned with cartoons, hero worship, and popular media themes and images. Ask children what kind of art they prefer to make.

Who Defines an Art Work and Decides Whether it is Art?

Dickie (1983) cited those critics who just categorize or define a thing, as art students look up the word "sculpture," for example, in the dictionary. The definition includes the term (category) "art." Critics, however, decide if a work is art or not.

What is the "Work" of a Work of Art? What does Work Mean?

Artists today can logically argue that their work is art, as Duchamp did, when he placed his shovel on a pedestal. Thus the work of art is no longer a thing or an object, but the "hard work" involved in arguing about its ideas. This is the birth of concept art, where the idea is more important than the result, which is often destroyed but documented, such as Christo's *Running Fence*. Art then becomes "deobjectified" and its ideas become more important. Give students the opportunity to debate one of Duchamp's or Christo's works, or better yet make their own conceptual piece and defend it as art.

What are Some Extended Strategies?

Review these theories by matching art works with theories, a crossword puzzle, or a word search. At the end of a course, ask students again to define a work of art to see how much they can recall. See Erickson and Katter's (1992) *Philosophy and Art* game to identify and debate important philosophical beliefs.

List of Aesthetic Discussion Questions

(1) Which object is the work of art? Why? (2) What is the nature of painting? Sculpture? Chair? (3) Who would consider it art? Would your mother? grandmother? (4) What is the original work of art? What is more valuable: the ideas, plans, prototype, or reproductions? (5) Of what does the art experience consist (making or responding)? (6) Are children artists? (7) What is work? What does the word "work" in art mean?

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Part II

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Part II addresses the question of what is a work of art in light of the contextual nature of art and offers different strategies to help broaden students' understanding. In recent years in Europe and America, a work of art is considered in its formalist sense—a unique thing separate from its origins. For many different peoples, now and in the past, an art work, exists in a web of relationships or a variety of contexts. These contexts include the world the artwork represents, the creator, the audience, the art world, and its culture (Parsons & Blocker, 1993). Listed below are strategies for understanding the functional, institutional, cultural, origin, and intercultural aspects and origins of art and the artworld.

What Is Art For? When Would this be Considered Art?

Ask students the leading question "What is art for?" and "When would this be considered art?" Students may have little trouble discussing the uses of everyday objects such as architecture or cultural artifacts, such as carved bone. Such objects are sacred things in some cultures. Carved bones, however, are valued by Eskimos essentially for their tactile form and good craftsmanship (Swinton, 1978). Dissanayake (1988) presents an entire book entitled *What is Art For?* in which she discusses "art as making special." Introduce students to the different rituals that extend art beyond a mere object and into a way of behaving and viewing a culture.

What is the Cultural Concept of Art?

Different cultures have differing opinions on the nature, value, and origin of art. Give students pots from different cultures to examine. For example, in Euro-American culture at one time, people valued pottery that was smooth, symmetrical, and finely painted. In Japan the Zen Buddhists, however, valued pottery which was wobbly and rustic—bearing the marks of nature and fire (Beittel, 1984). These pots were so highly valued that certain pieces became sacred treasures and Shoguns fought wars over them. Hopefully, students will discover what different cultures value things that some students may consider "ugly".

What is the Origin of Art?

Next ask students what is the origin of this art-pot? Give them clues: the clay, the potter, the pot, the culture?

What is the Origin of both the Pot and the Artist?

The Zen artist is not considered the creator, but the mediator or passageway (Beittel, 1984). Thus, the art work becomes a "cultural idea embodied in a physical vehicle or thing (Margolis, 1980).

Who Determines What is the Work as Art?

Art is an open-ended concept, usually determined by an institution. An institution has an established practice. What the religious institutions value, the museums may not. The institutional theory of art is that each agency determines for itself, what it will make or value (Dickie, 1983). Direct students to survey different institutions as to their prized art works and to report about them in class.

What is the Artworld? Are There Different Artworlds?

Since art ideas and the art industry are becoming more international, "the artworld" becomes more complicated. Discuss with students the following "What is the artworld" and "Who works in the world of art?" The artworld is a combination of many intersecting parts, including artists, gallery owners, buyers, framers, critics, and aestheticians, to name a few (Becker, 1982). Some critics believe that historically and culturally art is defined for different reasons by different people and those reasons should be respected. Others believe that the artworld transcends the physical world and can be understood in a metaphysical sense—that creation is the Being and the source of all art (Heidegger, 1977). The sources of this idea are rooted in Greek and Japanese traditions. For human beings, history is the source or originator of all art ideas. Many people believe that the artworld is now an intercultural world of images and virtual realities.

Extended Strategies.

Direct high school students to work in small groups and read one of the chapters of *Calliope's Sisters* (Anderson, 1990) and have them translate the cultural philosophy of art into a story, a puppet show for children, a videotaped ritual or even drawn ideas in a narrative fashion. Ask them to include a map, a timeline or cycle chart, explanation of major symbols and ideas, a studio procedure list, and a list of culturally-relevant materials. Summarize all the art ideas on the blackboard with students, so they can see the many conflicting opinions. Finally, videotape a class discussion on the nature and status of certain objects, while one student acts as the major curator. Show this video to parents and the school board so that they can be educated to understand that talk about art and aesthetics develops critical thinking. Read some of the major questions and issues in aesthetics (Eaton, 1988), so that you can defend your subject and ideas.

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